

Militia

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to until the militia started to surface.

"The haters — that's our problem. We don't have a big problem, but it's noisy."

Both Smith and Kemp said the movement needs to clearly state its goals, weed out the wackos in its ranks and separate itself from racial revolutionaries and armed zealots of the Far Right.

"Between the racist label and the bombing of Oklahoma City, the militia movement has been tarred," Kemp said. "Every militia-oriented individual feels like a target of the media, and all of us feel this drive to vindicate our movement."

At the very least, Vanderboegh's current push proves the militia movement is amorphous and fractured, not uniform or monolithic.

"Trying to get militia folk to do anything like a declaration is like trying to herd cats and chickens together," said Vanderboegh, a Presbyterian who is a member of Jesus for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership and was an anti-war protester during the Vietnam era.

"Militia folks are individualists; they're fractious."

But this lack of formality also explains the presence of militia leaders with ties to white-supremacist groups, such as John Treadwell, head of the Militia of Montana and a former associate of Aryan Nation leader Richard Gadsen of Hayden Lake, Idaho.

And because of its very loose-knit nature, with few formal membership rolls and nothing approaching a uniform code of conduct or other organizational trappings, the movement has attracted a wide spectrum of disaffected, mostly male, mostly white recruits.

"To paint all with one brush that is identical is just not right," said Bill Wasmuth, executive director of the Neighboring Coalition Against Melicious Harassment, a civil-rights watching group with offices in Seattle and Portland, Ore. "There are some militias with more violent tendencies, some with clear connections to the Klan and other white-supremacist groups. And some are of a different stripe."

Civil-rights watching groups dismiss Vanderboegh's effort. They say the presence of militia leaders with a racial past, combined with arrests and uncovered conspiracies like the voter-fraud accusations and their alleged links to both the general white-supremacist pattern that the well-

known and its advocacy of armed resistance is a threat to the American public.

"Starting charges against the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations is all well and good, but there's enough KKKmen, Aryan Nations and white supremacists involved in the militia movement to make those charges irrelevant," said Mike Reynolds, analyst for SkinWatch, the discriminatory arm of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala.

Given the amorphous nature of the far-right fringe, today's militiaman can be tomorrow's Christian patriot or militant tax protester or freeman. The lines are loose, and the stigma of one group flows freely to another, via the Internet or other more old-fashioned outlets, like books.

"There are militias out there who have no racial agenda at all, but they're in lock step with those who do," Reynolds said. "They have a common enemy — the federal government — and it's very difficult to separate relationships in the broad patriot movement."

Reynolds also blasts the racially homogeneous nature of the militia movement. Minority militiamen are rare; the few are trotted out as showcase examples of militia diversity.

"How many people of color do you see flocking to this movement?" Reynolds asked. "They may not be racists, but there's something about the movement that isn't attractive to people of color. Why is that?"

Despite the public stance of Vanderboegh and others, other civil-rights watchdogs say there is a subtler form of racism implicit in the constitutional interpretations of the militia movement, particularly the insistence on a literal interpretation of the document and their advocacy of states' rights.

"It's not an overt racism," Wasmuth said. "It's support for an interpretation of the Constitution that's very fundamentalist, very literal."

"They want the Constitution interpreted as it was 200 years ago. As it was then, it gave rights to a very select group of people — white property owners — and excluded women and people of color."

Kemp and Vanderboegh strongly disagree.

"I personally tend to read the Bill of Rights," Kemp said. "That cancels out all that other stuff. The Bill of Rights cancels any aristocratic notions of inferior citizenship."

Said Vanderboegh: "I don't want to go back to the plantation. I don't want to go back to states' rights. But there was a point where states' rights were preventing federal power that I think applies to today."

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Militia movement confronting necessity to clean up its act

By JIM NESETT

Newswatch News Service

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Never since the tragic explosion at Oklahoma City, scene of the nation's deadliest incident of domestic terrorism, has America's militia movement been branded as a gun-toting and conspiracy-crazed lot, their ranks swelled with Klansmen and neo-Nazi racists.

This image has been burned into the public consciousness by periodic arrests of militiamen in Arizona, Georgia and other states and funded by civil rights watchdog groups like the Anti-Defamation League, of Israel, B'nai B'rith and FairWatch.

But in recent months, there has been an organized effort by a scattering of the country's militia leaders across the country to denounce racism and acts of domestic terrorism, and to draw a sharp contrast between their movement and others on the far-right fringe who also preach an anti-government message.

The militia movement is not about white supremacy or armed revolt, they say. It is about the perceived threat to the Second Amendment rights of gun owners posed by the Brady Bill and the assault weapons ban. It is rooted in the fear of oppressive government power, as exemplified by the Branch Davidian tragedy at Waco, and the Randy Wayne White shooting at Ruby Ridge, Idaho.

"This is a constitutional movement — this is not about race," said Mike Vanderburgh, an illustrious Alabama minuteman who is a leader in the effort to burnish the movement's image. "The spontaneous militia that sprang up in the wake of Waco, Ruby Ridge and the Brady Bill are primarily second amendment people who were concerned that unconstitutional means of curbing those rights weren't sufficient."

Vanderburgh, a dispatcher for a local metals firm, is also author of the Alabama Declaration of Independence document that blames racism and domestic terrorists while pointing a finger at white supremacists as the possible perpetrators of Oklahoma City bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh and Lee Harvey Nichols.

If it gathers steam, Vanderburgh's effort could turn into a struggle for the soul of the militia movement, an attempt to place some distance between militiamen more interested in gun owners' rights and law-enforcement abuses, and others pushing a more violent, revolutionary or racial agenda.

"There is a backlog of from the 19th century to the 20th century, and Dick [Vanderburgh] is a Dallas-based author who wrote 'Letter to the Free State of Alabama' after the Branch Davidian assault." The more Vanderburgh and others can get the movement to realize, as that next year, they're marching in our Fourth of July parade and cooking barbecue, the more mainstream Americans see the militia movement becomes."

However, some critics of militias think the denunciation is a public relations stunt and not to be trusted.

The Alabama Declaration contends that Nichols and McVeigh had connections to a white supremacist compound in Oklahoma known as Oklahoma City — an attempt to shift attention away from the pair's links associated with the Branch Davidians and other militia groups in Kansas. It also repels the popular misconception among militiamen, Christian patriots and other right-wing extremists that the bombing was the result of a federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms sting operation that went sour.

The document even goes so far as to pin the identity of the infamous federal fire bomb suspect whose police-sketch image was circulated nationwide on a Philadelphia-born white supremacist.

But it is this very reliance on an alternative theory for the bombing that undermines the image-polishing effort. It gives critics the opportunity to dismiss the document as yet another conspiracy theory, in par with the militia's endless preoccupation with the New World Order, a potential invasion of America by former Warsaw Pact troops led by the United Nations and that red-stain militia bugaboo — black U.N. helicopters, crowds for the current invasion.

Some militia leaders worry about getting into another conspiracy theory to rehabilitate the image of the militia movement.

"Mike [Vanderburgh] makes it a little too easy to be shot down," said Mike Kelly, spokesman for the Traditional Minutemen, a militia group based in Gaithersburg, Md. "From our perspective anything that will take the heat away, anything that will correct the image, should be done. But if we issue anything that can be used against us, it will be used against us."

Said Ray Smith, a militia leader from Texas: "We'd be better off letting the fringe die off from lack of attention. ... We've got about 1 percent. We've got to watch people who are here in this country for years and weren't committed and

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